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SONGS OF WESTERN COWBOYS

BY G. F. WILL

THE songs of the Western cowboys are many and varied, and form a distinctly interesting development of folk-lore. In view of the fact that these are being fast forgotten in the Dakotas, and as Montana ranching is dying out, the writer has been trying to make some sort of a collection of the words of these songs as heard in North Dakota, particularly. This has been a more difficult task than anticipated, as, although many know a few verses, there are very few who can give at all complete versions. The three cowboy songs given here were all obtained from Mr. Otis Tye of Yucca, N. Dak. The last song, which has been transplanted from the Wisconsin lumber camps of the seventies, Mr. Fred Roberts gave. This hardly belongs with the cowboy songs, but it seems permissible to insert it as it has become quite widely known in this region.

The range songs of the cowboys grew up in various ways. Some were songs heard in city music halls and transplanted; others were old country ballads retouched and changed to suit; and very many were composed, minstrel fashion, by some member of the circle as a group of cowboys lay around the camp-fire.

The songs were also sung on widely different occasions. Sometimes they were shouted in the saloons of the towns when engaged in a "celebration." Sometimes they were sung in the ranch-house at the stag-dances, again they were heard at the camp-fire out on the round-up. And perhaps one of their most frequent uses was in quieting the cattle at night as the cowboys rode round them on night-guard.

The first song to be presented is called "Amanda, the Captive." This song the cowboy who gave it said he had first heard sung on one of the large South Dakota ranches, by a Texas cowboy. And the Texan claimed to have learned it in old Mexico many years before from a still older Texan, who sung it to the cattle when on night-guard.

The song is not entire, large fragments having been forgotten. It is as follows:—

The sun had gone down o'er the hills in the west,
And the last beams had faded o'er the mossy hill's crest
And the beauties of nature and the charms of the fair.

At the foot of the mountain Amanda did ride,
At the hoot of the owl or the catamount's cry,
Or the howl of some wolf in its low granite cell,
Or the crash of some dead forest tree as it fell.

The camp-fire was kindled and fanned by the breeze,
And the red embers shone o'er the evergreen trees;
The watch-fire was blazing, each warrior was there,
And Amanda was doomed the torture to bear.

With an eye like an eagle and a step like a deer,
Young Albion the leader of those warriors appeared;
He cried, "My warriors, forbear, forbear!
The maiden shall live, by my wampum I swear,
And if there's a victim to be burned at the tree,
Young Albion your leader that victim shall be."

Early next morning at the break of the day,
A birch-bark canoe was seen gliding away,
Or like a wild duck that skims o'er the tide,
Young Albion and Amanda the captive did ride.

And great was her joy upon reaching the shore
To embrace her dear father and mother once more.

Young Albion stood by and saw them embrace
With a sigh in his heart and a tear on his face,
But all he would ask was shelter and food
From the friends of Amanda for the chief of the wood.

The second cowboy song collected is called "A Home on the Range." No information could be obtained as to its origin, but after questioning a number of older cowboys it seems that it is almost universally known in the northwest, though most of the men knew but a few verses.

1. Oh give me a home where the buffalo roam,
Where the deer and the antelope play,
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word,
And the skies are not cloudy all day.

Chorus.

A home, a home where the deer and the antelope play,
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word,
And the skies are not cloudy all day.

2. Oh, often at night when summer was bright,
Alone 'neath the stars I would stray;
I stood there amazed and asked as I gazed,
If beauty could excel that of ours.

Chorus.

3. Oh, I love the wild flowers in this bright land of ours,
I love to hear the wild curlew scream
O'er the bluffs and high rocks where the antelope flocks
To graze on the mountain so green.

Chorus.

4. Oh, give me a land where bright diamond sand
Shows in the glittering stream
That glideth along like a graceful white swan,
Like a maid in a lovely day dream.

Chorus.

5. Oh, give me a gale with an orbital wail,
Where life in its streams busily flow
On the banks of the Platte River,
Where seldom if ever
The poisonous syringias grow;
Where the air is so pure, the breezes so free,
The zephyrs so balmy at night,
I would not exchange my home on the range
For another, be it ever so bright.

Chorus.

6. The prairie all checkered with buffalo paths,
Where once they roamed proudly too and fro;
But now they've grown dim
Where hunters have been,
And the cowboys have laid them so low.
The red-men pressed in these parts of the West,
And likely they ne'er will return,
For the farmers they start in search of those parts
Whenever the story they learn.

Chorus.

The third song is known as "The Dying Cowboy," and seems more ballad-like than the others. In fact, it suggests strongly a parody on some of the English ballads.

1. As I rode down to the theatre, the theatre,
As I rode to the theatre one day,
I met a young cowboy all dressed in white linen;
All dressed in white linen, all fixed for the grave.

Chorus.

Go play the fife lowly and beat the drum slowly,
And play the death march as they carry me on;
Take me to the prairie and lay the sod o'er me,
For I'm a young cowboy, I know I've done wrong.

2. When once in the saddle I used to go dashing,
When once in the saddle I used to be gay;
I first took to drinking and then to card playing,
Got shot through the lungs and am dying to-day.

Chorus.

3. Go write a letter to my gray-headed mother,
And break the news gently to sister dear;

But there is another more dear than a mother,
Who'd bitterly weep if she knew I were here.

Chorus.

4. Go gather around me a group of young cowboys,
And tell them the story the cowboy has said,
And tell them take warning before they go farther,
And stop the wild roaming before it's too late.

Chorus.

5. Go bring me a cup, a cup of cold water,
A cup of cold water the dying man said;
But ere they returned the spirit had got him, —
He'd gone to the giver, the cowboy was dead.

Chorus.

The following song came from Wisconsin with some of the first settlers in this region, and is more accurately a shanty than a cowboy song.

THE BIG EAU CLAIR

Every girl she has her troubles,
Likewise a man has his;
I'll relate, to you the agony
Of a fellow's story, viz. —
It relates about affections
Of a damsel young and fair,
And an interesting shanty boy
From off the big Eau Clair.

This young and dauntless maiden
Was of noble pedigree,
Her mother kept a milliner shop
In the town of Mosinee —
Kept waterfalls and ribbons
And imitation lace
For all the high-toned people
In that gay and festive place.

The shanty boy was handsome,
Had a curly head of hair,
Not a handsomer man could there be found
From off the big Eau Clair.

This milliner said her daughter
A shanty boy ne'er should wed,
But Sue, she did not seem to care
For what her mother said.
This milliner she packed up her goods
And went and hired a hack

And opened up another shop
Way down in Fondulac.

Now Sue got broken-hearted
And weary of her life,
For she dearly loved the shanty boy
And wished to be his wife.

And when brown autumn came along
And ripened all the crops,
She lighted out for Baraboo
And went a picking hops;
But in this occupation
She found but little joy,
For her thoughts kept still reviving
About her shanty boy.

She took the scarlet fever,
Lay sick a week or two
In Asa Baldwin's pest-house
In the town of Baraboo.
The doctors tried, but all in vain,
Her hopeless life to save,
Now millions of young hop-lice
Are dancing o'er her grave.

When this news reached the shanty boy,
He quickly to perceive
He hid his saw in a hollow log,
He traded off his axe,
And hired out as sucker
On a fleet of sailor jacks.
But in this occupation
No comfort could he find,
The milliner's daughter's funeral
Came frequent to his mind.

He fell off a rapids piece
At the falls of Mosinee,
Which ended all his fate for love
And all his misery.
And now the bold Wisconsin
Rolls her waves above his bones,
His companions are the catfish,
His grave a pile of stones.

This milliner she is bankrupt now,
Her shop has gone to rack,
She talks quite strong of moving
Away from Fondulac.

For her pillow it is haunted
By her daughter's auburn hair
And the ghost of that young shanty boy
From off the Big Eau Clair.

BISMARCK, N. DAK.